Pentecost 10 Proper 14

August 9, 2020

1 Kings 19:9-18

A few of my friends who have little kids have been posting pictures these last few months of the blanket forts their kids are building.

Kids *love* having these places to hide out from their siblings and their parents. These forts aren’t just a place to hide from an annoying brother or sister. They allow kids to be creative, to have a feeling that they have a place of their own, which can be hard in a small house with several people always around.

But they also provide a sense of security. Blanket forts are a safe haven from the chaos of life, from the forces that threaten to overwhelm us. Whether we use pillows, sofa cushions, and dining room chairs or not, we all want that safe haven now and then.

The prophet Elijah wanted a place to hide when confronted with forces that threatened to harm him. His first hiding place wasn’t a fort, but a tree that he sat under.

Elijah was fresh off a very public victory, a very public display of God’s power and might, which came upon his request, because of his faith and obedience to God’s call. After that very public display, King Ahab was unhappy. His wife, Jezebel, was angry, and threatened Elijah’s life.

So, instead of getting a chance to relish that moment, Elijah was running for his life, desperately seeking a place to hide.

Through a conversation with God, we get to hear about Elijah’s fears, the crisis of faith he found himself dealing with in the hours and days after he witnessed God’s strength and faithfulness in the presence of the prophets of Baal.

On the run, Elijah found a tree under which he could take shelter. There, instead of reflecting upon how God had proved faithful by responding to Elijah’s prayers, instead of offering praise to God, Elijah’s fears ruled him. “That’s enough, God. Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

With that cheery thought, he curled up to take a nap.

An angel attended to Elijah, bringing food and water. And because he rested, because he ate and drank what the angel brought him, he was able to travel to Mt. Horeb.

But even putting hundreds of miles between him and Ahab and Jezebel didn’t set Elijah’s mind at ease.

At Mt. Horeb, he found his second place to hide, a cave.

Again, God allowed Elijah time to rest. But it was not in God’s plan for Elijah to hide for the rest of his life.

When Elijah woke the next morning, it was time for a talk.

I’ve often wondered what God’s tone of voice was with this question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Does God have the deep, booming, rather intimidating voice of James Earl Jones? Or the slightly bemused voice of George Burns? Or the Morgan Freeman voice, which somehow conveys both empathy and ‘don’t mess with me’ at the same time?

It’s easy to imagine Elijah’s tone of voice. He’s tired, he’s scared, he’s frustrated, maybe angry, maybe petulant. “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Elijah’s fears were getting the better of him, stopping him from realizing that he wasn’t alone, making him feel as if the entire future of the faith rested on his shoulders alone. Because notice what Elijah hasn’t said. He hasn’t said, “I need your help God. I need your protection from those would seek to harm me because I am faithful and obedient to you.”

So God arranges another demonstration for Elijah. “Go out of your cave, because I’m going to pass by.”

The verses that follow are beautiful. I particularly like how it’s translated in The Message: “A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before God, but God wasn’t to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but God wasn’t in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but God wasn’t in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.”

Elijah had already witnessed God’s power and might, not just once, but multiple times. Because of Elijah’s faith and trust in God, God had provided for the widow of Zarephath and her son when their food threatened to run out. Later, when the son died, God listened to the voice of Elijah and revived the woman’s son. And then, in the presence of the prophets of Baal, God burned up the offering Elijah presented, even though Elijah had soaked it in water.

God seems to have believed that another demonstration of power and might, another miracle, was not what Elijah needed.

And so instead of appearing to Elijah in “the rebuke of the storm, the terror of the earthquake, or the purification of the fire,”[[1]](#footnote-1) God chooses the still, small voice; the whisper; the sound of sheer silence.

Elijah walks out of the cave into that sheer silence. And there, God once again asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Somehow, Elijah’s experience with God, *even being in the presence of God*, had not changed him.

Because Elijah responds the same as before: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Elijah’s faith had been crushed by his fear. Still, God gave Elijah work to do. Leave your cave and go anoint Jehu and Hazael as kings, and then go anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place.

And God reminds Elijah that he is, in fact, *not* alone. There are still faithful people in Israel. His efforts were not in vain.

We all have low moments, like Elijah. Times when our fears prevent us from seeing that we are not alone. When we want to stay in our caves or our blanket forts and hide. Because there, we can’t make mistakes. We can’t be hurt. We are safe.

But we can’t stay in our caves forever.

And yes, we are living in a time when we’re being told to stay home as much as possible.

But it doesn’t mean there isn’t work to be done. It doesn’t mean there isn’t work we can do while staying safe.

If anything, there’s *more* work to be done now than before.More people who are lonely, more people who are vulnerable, more people who need a reminder that they are not alone, that they are loved, that they matter.

It’s time. God has provided you with the gifts you need and the people to support you. You are not alone, and you need not do everything on your own.

Get out of your cave, even if only metaphorically. And go do the work to which you have been called by God.

1. Christopher Davis, *Workingpreacher.org*, 1 Kings 19:1-18, commentary for August 9, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)